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The conference report was agreed to.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas is recognized.

ISRAEL'S UNDENIABLE RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENSE

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, the terrorist group Hamas, which is supported by Iran, took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. When Hamas did so, Israel put in place a legitimate and justified blockade of Gaza out of concern for the safety of its citizens. Hamas and its allies have fired more than 10,000 rockets and mortars from Gaza into Israel since 2001, killing at least 18 Israelis and wounding dozens of others. The Israeli defense minister said this week that Israel considers the Gaza Strip to be essentially an Iranian military base, just 3 kilometers from an Israeli town and 60 kilometers from Tel Aviv, Israel's second largest city.

The Israeli blockade has been effective in reducing the flow of weapons into Gaza and the firing of rockets from Gaza into southern Israel. Were Iran and other supporters of Hamas allowed access to the ports of Gaza, the people of Israel would be put directly in harm's way.

On May 27, the Israeli Navy, maintaining the integrity of the blockade, intercepted the so-called "Free Gaza" flotilla and peacefully boarded five of the six ships. The sixth ship was filled with extremists whose stated intent was martyrdom. Those extremists brutally attacked members of the Israeli Navy, who were forced to act in self-defense and, in some instances, use lethal force. Although Israel was exercising its right to self-defense, which every nation is entitled to do, the incident raised an international outcry, just as it was designed to do.

Some even condemned the actions of the Israeli Navy. The "Free Gaza" flotilla was a disgraceful and premeditated attempt to break the blockade and provoke a violent confrontation with Israel, hidden under the cloak of a humanitarian relief effort. This type of despicable conduct must be condemned, especially by friends and allies of Israel.

Every country has the right to defend itself, and Israel is no different. The calls from United Nations leaders and others for an investigation into the actions of Israel have been troubling. In my view, these calls have served only to question Israel's right to self defense.

To its credit, Israel has unilaterally established a five-person panel to conduct an investigation into the flotilla incident, and its work will be monitored by two foreign observers. Yet U.N. officials are not satisfied and continue to push for a separate, international probe into the incident. As

such, I believe the U.N. is unfairly singling out Israel for criticism and using a double-standard.

According to news reports, there may be new flotillas literally looming on the horizon, preparing to challenge Israel's legitimate sea blockade of Gaza. Iran's "Children of Gaza" flotilla may set sail for Gaza as soon as this weekend, according to the spokesman for the Iranian Red Crescent. Iran has directly bolstered Hamas' ability to strike Israel, and its leaders have repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel. Now, they may be sending ships. No good can come from this.

Furthermore, another group in Lebanon has announced its intention to sail its ships toward the Gaza blockade soon. Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the terrorist group Hezbollah, has called on Lebanese citizens to help break the blockade of Gaza. So, Israel has legitimate concerns that this flotilla might be used to smuggle weapons into Gaza. I only hope the Lebanese government will do the right thing and put a stop to it.

At a time of great instability in the Middle East, these flotillas serve only as additional destabilizing forces. The Middle East does not need further violence. Israel has the solemn right to defend itself and its citizens against these flotillas and any other security threats, which continue to gather. Israel needs friends more than ever right now.

Mr. President, I have offered a sense-of-the-Senate resolution which does a number of things: First, it reaffirms the United States' strong support of Israel, our friend and steadfast ally. It expresses the sense of the Senate that Israel's right to self-defense is inherent and undeniable. It condemns the violent attack and provocation by the extremists aboard the Mavi Marmara and any future attempts to break Israel's legal blockade of Gaza. It condemns Hamas for its failure to recognize Israel's right to exist, and the Government of Iran for its support of Hamas and its undermining of Israel's security.

This resolution also encourages the Government of Turkey to recognize that continued strong relations with Israel are of the utmost importance. The resolution supports our friend and ally, Israel, and it does so unequivocally. By passing this important resolution, the Senate will help remind the world that the United States stands with our ally—Israel.

Mr. President, there are 14 Senators who have cosponsored this resolution, and at this point I ask unanimous consent that the Foreign Relations Committee be discharged from further consideration and the Senate now proceed to the consideration of S. Res. 548.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will report the resolution by title.

The assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A resolution (S. Res. 548) to express the sense of the Senate that Israel has an undeniable right to self-defense, and to condemn the recent destabilizing actions by extremists aboard the ship Mavi Marmara.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the resolution.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, several colleagues had some constructive suggestions about amendments to this measure, and there were two amendments that we modified the original resolution with. At this point, I ask unanimous consent that the amendment at the desk be agreed to, and I urge adoption of the resolution, as amended.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, the amendment is agreed to.

The amendment (No. 4396) was agreed to, as follows:

On page 7, strike lines 22-24

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there further debate on the resolution, as amended?

The Senator from New Mexico.

Mr. BINGAMAN. Mr. President, before the Senate votes on Senate Resolution 548, I wish to speak briefly in opposition to it.

This resolution speaks to this so-called "flotilla incident" that occurred a few weeks ago near Gaza. I am concerned that this resolution does not help either the United States or Israel. I support Israel. I have done so during all my years here in the Senate. But I also believe that the only way to ensure Israel's long-term security is to have a genuine peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. This resolution does not bring us closer to that peace.

No one questions Israel's right to defend itself. I know that questions have been raised about the relationship between the Humanitarian Relief Foundation and Hamas, and I am concerned about those questions and they need to be answered. But I am also concerned that Israel's response to the flotilla and the deaths onboard the Mavi Marmara once again shows to Israel's enemies that they can provoke Israel into taking actions that undermine international support for Israel.

Israel was able to board five of the ships with no loss of life, as my colleague from Texas indicated, and that needs to be acknowledged. But this incident has distracted the attention of the international community away from the peace process. It has overshadowed the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, which occurred nearly 4 years ago today—in fact, on June 25, 2006. Hamas should immediately release Gilad Shalit. Unfortunately, I do not believe this resolution will help to make that happen.

Nor does this resolution talk about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Israel has allowed humanitarian supplies into Gaza, but it is evident from the conditions in Gaza that those supplies have not been sufficient. One U.S. charity estimates that 400 trucks of basic food supplies are needed in Gaza